



Life in law - Audio

Royal Courts of Justice Advice Bureau, London

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TRANSCRIPT

Fade up street atmos

Introduction - KB Credit card debt, redundancy and eviction are all part of the day's work for solicitor Rebecca Scott. She advises people in trouble, who can't afford a lawyer. Let's join her at the beginning of her day.

RS My name's Rebecca Scott. I'm a solicitor and I work at the Legal Advice Bureau which is based in the Royal Courts of Justice on the Strand in Central London. It's a huge, imposing, Gothic-style building, and it was opened by Queen Victoria in the 19th century. It's home to the High Court and Court of Appeal. It's at the centre of the administration of justice in England. There are solicitors and barristers all queuing to go through security for their morning hearings. Security's become much tighter in recent years, since the London terrorism bombings.

Security atmos . . . sound of footsteps

RS I'm in the Great Hall of the Royal Courts of Justice now which has the courts leading off it. My clients' cases will be heard here and we also have a lot of celebrity cases that are heard here. We've recently had the Julian Assange extradition case and two weeks ago Rio Ferdinand lost his privacy case here.

Sound of footsteps

RS I'm going into my office now. Morning, Jacqui.

JB at 1' 33" Hi.

RS Are you all right?

RS My job is to advise members of the public who are involved in civil court proceedings - which means non-criminal proceedings - and can't afford to get a lawyer elsewhere or can't get a legal aid solicitor. A typical client would be someone that's maybe got debt issues, council tax arrears, credit card debts; someone who's been threatened with eviction and might lose their home; employment cases where people have been made redundant and they don't think it's fair.

I'm a solicitor which means, when a client has a claim brought against them, I will advise on the initial court documents and on the procedure, and the day-to-day running of a case. But very often the client will need someone to go into court and speak on their behalf at the trial of the case, at the very end, and that's the barrister's job. There's a small amount of solicitors that have what is called 'higher rights of audience', which means they're trained to present final hearings and trials at court, but most solicitors don't have those rights.

So if a client came to me and they'd just received some court proceedings in the post threatening to evict them from their property, they might come in and see me and I will check that they get what's called their defence in to that claim, and that they're getting all their procedures right. And then I'll probably send the case on to another charity that we work with called the Bar Pro Bono Unit, and that charity has barristers that give their time up for free. And hopefully a barrister will take that case on and make the arguments at the final hearing as to why the client should stay in their home. And that's a brilliant service because it's really terrifying to go to court by yourself. It's actually quite frightening to go as a lawyer, but to go by yourself is pretty terrifying. And if you can imagine, you know, our clients are at an absolute state of crisis, which makes their fear even worse, and a percentage of them have mental health issues so they would find it impossible to represent themselves effectively and make arguments.

The RCJ Advice Bureau is based in London, but we are a national service and we will actually see anybody that has legal proceedings in England but can't afford to pay for a solicitor, or can't get a legal aid certificate. A legal aid certificate means that the public purse will pay for the solicitor or barrister's advice, but that's become very difficult to obtain because it's been reduced by the Government. We will advise by telephone, by email, in person, and by letter.

I always wanted to work at a Citizens Advice Bureau. I'm from Liverpool. My mother was a nurse, and my Dad was a trades union man. My mother felt that you should always help people with the work you do. I remember, when I was a teenager, I told her I wanted to work for a Citizens Advice Bureau and she felt that was very sweet, but told me that she didn't think lawyers had those types of jobs and that I would have to go into legal aid. So I went to study law at the University of Sheffield,

which I very much enjoyed. And when I graduated I applied for training contracts and got a job in Liverpool, doing mainly personal injury work, which consisted mostly of road traffic accident work. But I found that a lot of my friends were moving down to London, and I was tempted by the whole bright lights, big city, and wanted to join them and have fun. I got a job working at a firm in London, doing work with people who were mainly complaining about their solicitors. I didn't enjoy that job, and I resigned from it. I saw an advert for this job in *The Guardian*, and I've been here for nine years now.

I'm just going to pop through and see my boss, Alison Lamb - she's the Chief Executive - see if she's got anything for me today.

Sound of footsteps

RS
AL at 5' 27"

Hi, Alison. Are you all right?
I'm fine . . . (Fade)

RS

The team here consists of three duty solicitors - I'm one of them - and then I have my colleagues, Susan and Jacqui, who work with me. We're full-time and permanently employed. And then we're very lucky that we have 60 law firms that volunteer their lawyers for us. So we have around 200 lawyers that come in and give up their time and skills, free of charge, to advise our clients. There's a similar scheme over at our family law office on High Holborn, and again the volunteer lawyers come in and advise there.

Telephone rings

RS

Hello . . . Oh, hi, Alex. How are you? . . . Oh, okay. Who have I got?
. . . (Fade)

A typical client will be probably distressed and they won't have discussed their problem with anybody, and they can be nervous and intimidated by having come through security and by the court environment. What I will do is try and quickly get to the heart of what the legal issue is. I see my job as similar to an A&E department. A client can come in with lots of problems caused by their circumstances, and I will have to prioritise those problems and work on the most pressing legal issue, and try and turn the situation round, and then filter them off for help with the underlying problem.

Sound of typing

RS

Okay, I'm just looking at my first client for Monday morning, just having a look at their file before they come in. It's a client that's been in before, but because of our rota system I've not seen this lady before so I don't know what her case is about. On the front of the file, we've got the client information sheet which has all the client's contact details and all the details about the case. Just looking through the file, I can see it's quite a sad case. It's a lady that's been made bankrupt and, as a result of that, her home's been repossessed. It looks like the case has reached a very late stage where she's actually lost her home, but she's coming in for advice on getting her possessions back from the property and from trying to negotiate the trustee in bankruptcy's costs because those legal costs seem to be very high. So that's what we will be helping her with . . .

One of the things we're very worried about as an organisation is the Government's proposed legal aid cuts. We opposed the Bill. My boss, Alison Lamb, put me forward to go into Parliament and give evidence to

the Judicial Committee as part of the consultation process - she's not a lawyer, that's why I got stuck with it! But we made very rigorous arguments opposing the legal aid cuts and, unfortunately, I don't think any of those arguments were successful. The Government's determined to push it through which means that a lot of the people that would have got Government support to pay for legal advice now won't be able to access that. So we're expecting to see a massive increase in the amount of clients we see, and we already can't see all the people that need advice from us.

Sound of typing

RS

One of the ways we're planning to deal with this increased demand is we're developing an online tool, which sounds like a bit of jargon. But if you can imagine that you're sat in front of your computer, you need to find out what to do if someone's sent you a claim form or you're thinking of going to court, it will give you pictures of each of the types of form you might have received and you can pick which one it is, and then it will help you, tell you what you need to do next, which form you need to fill in, which court you need to be in. Where legal advice is needed, the computer will tell you which agency you can go to, free of charge, to get that advice. We'll be one of those agencies, but it might direct you to the Bar Pro Bono Unit or your local law centre, and hopefully that will help guide people through the more, early administrative stages of a claim, and then they can come to us for an appointment when they really need the legal advice at crucial stages.

I love my job. I'm a people person and I like variety and I like helping people so, even though it doesn't pay very much, it really suits my personality. One of the most rewarding cases I've had involved a lady that had sought asylum. She came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is a very dangerous place, and there was a civil war going on at the time, and she'd been tortured over there, and sought asylum in this country. As soon as she came into my office, I could tell that she was afraid, sensed that, and that she'd been through a lot. Her application to remain in the country was refused by the immigration authorities. She was interviewed in English - and her first language was French - and she was interviewed without anybody else being present, and she got the number of children she had wrong, by mistake, because she was trying to speak English. We helped her apply for a judicial review of that decision in the Administrative Court, and judicial review is the procedure whereby the decisions of public bodies are checked. We were very fortunate that the Court granted her permission, which means the case has good prospects of success, and on seeing that decision the Home Office immediately realised that they were going to lose, and they conceded the case and made the decision that she could stay in the country. That was a really satisfying decision. Her life would have been in danger if she'd been returned to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Sound of typing

RS

Erm . . . the challenges of the job? There's a lot of different practical pulls on your time - co-workers will need support, the 'phone will go, emergency clients will come in - so you often feel that you're being torn in different directions. In terms of the clients, they've often got very complex problems and they may see you as kind of like a social worker that can fix everything for them when actually, you know, you're a lawyer and you can only fix certain issues. So it can be quite difficult keeping your boundaries in place and realising that you're not a doctor or a care

worker. I really enjoy my job and I think I'm very blessed, and I think if you enjoy what you do, you've cracked it really.

Telephone rings

AA at 11' 42"

Good afternoon, RCJ Advice Bureau . . . Sure, you want to get advice relating to credit card debt . . . (Fade)

AUDIO ENDS